Daniel the Stylite

(c. 409 – c. 493)

BRIEFING

Daniel the Stylite (Greek: Δανιὴλ ὁ στυλίτης, c. 409 – 493) is a saint and stylite of the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Eastern Catholic Churches. He is commemorated on 11 December according to the liturgical calendars of these churches.

HISTORY

Early life

Daniel was born in Maratha, a village in Upper Mesopotamia near Samosata in present-day Turkey. He entered a monastery at the age of 12 and lived there until he was thirty-eight. During a voyage he made with his abbot to Antioch, he passed by the city of Telanissos (today Deir Semaan) and received the benediction and encouragement of Simeon the Stylite. Then he visited various holy places, stayed in various convents, and retired in 451 AD into the ruins of a pagan temple.

Stylite

Daniel established his pillar north of Constantinople. The owner of the land where he placed his pillars had not been consulted, hence he appealed to the Byzantine emperor Leo I and patriarch Gennadius of Constantinople. The emperor proposed to dislodge him, but was deterred through unknown means. Gennadius ordained Daniel as a priest. When the ceremony was over, the patriarch administered the Eucharist by means of a ladder, which Daniel had ordered to be brought. Gennadius then received the Eucharist from Daniel. People from all over came to see him and touch his pillar, which healed the faithful. Daniel stood through rain, snow, and the freezing cold.

Daniel lived on the pillar for 33 years. Due to continuous standing, his feet were reportedly covered with sores, cuts, and ulcers, and the winds of Thrace sometimes stripped him of his scanty clothing.

He was visited by both Emperor Leo I the Thracian—accompanied by King Gubazes I of Lazica—and Emperor Zeno. As a theologian, he came out against monophysitism.

ASSOCIATED PRAYERS

The following is his prayer before he began his life on the pillar:

> *I yield Thee glory, Jesus Christ my God, for all the blessings which Thou hast heaped upon me, and for the grace which Thou hast given me that I should embrace this manner of life. But Thou knowest that in ascending this pillar, I lean on Thee alone, and that to Thee alone I look for the happy issue of mine undertaking. Accept, then, my object: strengthen me that I finish this painful course: give me grace to end it in holiness.*

The following is the advice he gave to his disciples just before his death:

> *Hold fast humility, practice obedience, exercise hospitality, keep the fasts, observe the vigils, love poverty, and above all maintain charity, which is the first and great commandment; keep closely bound to all that regards piety, avoid the tares of the heretics. Separate never from the Church your Mother; if you do these things your righteousness shall be perfect.*

DANIEL ACCORDING TO AN ORTHODOX ARTICLE

Our holy Father Daniel enlightens the world by the brilliance of his virtues like a star, and as a living ladder he invites us to leave earthly things and to climb heavenward. He was born in the little village of Meratha near Samosata in response to the prayers of his mother, who had long been childless, after a radiant vision that signified the glory in store for her son. When he reached five years of age, his parents took him to the local monastery in order to consecrate him to the Lord like the Prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 1:19ff).

Although not received into the monastery on account of his tender years, he was given his name on this occasion for the abbot told him to fetch one of the books that lay before the sanctuary, and he picked up the book of the Prophet Daniel. On attaining his twelfth year he heard his mother say, 'My child, I have consecrated you to God.' Without more ado, he made his own way to a not-far-distant monastery where his earnest supplications overcame the reluctance of the Abbot to admit him to the brotherhood. Such was his progress in the way of God and so great his ardor in the contests of virtue that, after a while, in the presence of his overjoyed parents, he was tonsured and clothed in the angelic Habit by the Abbot, whose favorite disciple he was to become.

One day, traveling with his Abbot to a meeting of Archimandrites called by the Archbishop of Antioch, Daniel found the opportunity to fulfill his dearest wish of visiting the illustrious Saint Symeon the Stylite, whose unusual ascesis was the admiration of some but questionable to others. On arriving at the foot of the Saint's pillar, all those who had doubted his holiness were dumbstruck when they saw the heroic warfare waged by the great Elder for the sake of Christ, and felt the loving kindness that he extended. Fear gripped all the Archimandrites, and Daniel was the only one of the company who overcame it and climbed the ladder to take the blessing of the Saint. 'Take courage, Daniel, be strong and patient,' Saint Symeon said to him, 'for you will have to bear many hardships for God. But I trust in the God whom I serve that He will strengthen and accompany you on your way.'

Some time later his Abbot was called to the Lord, and Daniel, who was then thirty-seven, was appointed to succeed him. Whereupon, having made sure that the monk who held the second place was competent to direct the monastery, he left and went back to Saint Symeon. He spent two weeks with him before setting out at last for Palestine, with the intention of visiting the Holy Places prior to withdrawing into the solitude of the desert. On the way, there suddenly appeared to him an old man resembling Saint Symeon, who persuaded him not to run the risk of falling into the hands of the rebellious Samaritans, but to take the road to Constantinople, the 'new Jerusalem,' illustrious through the presence of numberless precious relics and of so many sanctuaries, and where he could easily find the peace and quiet of the desert in the surrounding countryside.

When he reached Anaplus (now Rumeli-Hisari), high up on the European shore of the Bosphorus, just beyond the confines of the imperial City, he first spent seven days at prayer in the church of the Holy Archangel Michael. Then clad in the armor of God, with the shield of faith and the sword of prayer (Eph. 6:14), following the example of Anthony and Paul and of many other valiant heroes of the faith, he boldly entered within a pagan temple, the haunt of demons that used to harass all who passed that way by land or sea. Taking no account of the screams which pierced the silence of the night, nor of the showers of rocks, the athlete of Christ continued steadfast in prayer night and day and put the unclean spirits to flight with the fire of the life-giving Cross. His reputation soon drew crowds of visitors who could speak to him only through a narrow opening in the wall. The Devil, infuriated at his renown, stirred up some of the clergy of the church of Saint Michael to become jealous of the servant of God, and they denounced him as a heretic to the holy Archbishop Anatolius. The wise shepherd made little of their accusations at first but, when they returned with more calumnies, he sent officers from Constantinople to bring Daniel before him. Not only was he greatly edified by Daniel's pure confession of faith but he was also cured of a serious illness through the prayer of the holy ascetic, of whom he became one of the most fervent admirers. It was with great reluctance that he let him return at last to his hermitage, accompanied by a rejoicing crowd.

One day, nine years later, when he was fifty-one years old, Daniel fell into an ecstasy and saw Saint Symeon the Stylite standing before him at the top of a huge pillar of cloud; on either side of him were two men of shining appearance who, at the command of the Elder, fetched Daniel and brought him up to his side. Symeon gave him a fatherly embrace and disappeared into heaven, leaving his spiritual son on the pillar accompanied by the two angels. The vision was confirmed soon after by the arrival of the monk Sergius, one of the disciples of Saint Symeon the Stylite, bringing with him the leathern, hooded tunic of the Saint.1 He had come to the City intending to present it to the Emperor Leo I (457-74) at the same time as announcing his master's decease but, having awaited an audience for some days in vain, he was wonderfully directed to Daniel, whose disciple he became, and to whom he delivered the precious relic as to the new Elisha, who was to take up the mantle of Elijah after his departure into heaven (cf. 2 Kings 2:13).

In the strength of this sign and informed in a dream that the time was now ripe, Daniel left the temple to follow the way of Saint Symeon and to mount a twelve-foot-high pillar which, through the care of some friends, had been made for him in the City and was set up in a lonely spot, indicated by the fluttering of a white dove sent by God. The owner of the land, an officer of the imperial household called Gelanius, annoyed at the trespass, wanted to drive Daniel off his property; but a sudden storm which destroyed his vines, together with the steadfastness of the Saint, worked such a change in him that he was inspired to have a new, higher pillar set up beside the first one for the heroic soldier of Christ. Sergius settled at the foot of this new pillar in order to attend to the direction of the ever-increasing number of disciples.

A spectacle to men and to angels, like Christ on the Cross, Daniel never moved from there and lived only for heaven; in return God made of the pillar a channel of His grace, which was poured forth abundantly upon the faithful. The miracles, signs, healings, words of salvation and heavenly wisdom of the Stylite soon attracted crowds of visitors, among them the foremost personages of the day, including the consul Cyrus, whose two daughters were healed by the Saint, also the Empress Eudocia on her return from Africa, and the Emperor Leo himself. He, having obtained an heir through the prayer of Daniel, expressed his gratitude by having the foundations laid for a third pillar.

Some heretics, eaten up by the demon of jealousy, sent a famous harlot to bring scandal upon the Saint; but she was attacked and cruelly tormented by a demon. She was finally delivered from it by the prayer of Daniel, to the dismay of her abettors whom she openly denounced. In view of the high renown of the man of God, the pious Emperor urged the holy Archbishop Gennadius (458-71; 17 Nov.) to ordain him priest. But when the Archbishop and his clergy arrived at the pillar, Daniel, who realized what their plan was, would not allow Gennadius to climb up to him. The Archbishop therefore pronounced the prayer of ordination from a distance, calling upon Christ to lay His hand invisibly upon his disciple from above, while the crowd shouted, 'He is worthy!' In the end, Daniel gave way and ordered the ladder to be set in place so that the Archbishop could climb up to him. Having embraced, they both received the holy Communion, the one from the other between heaven and earth.

Not long after Daniel had taken his station on the third pillar, the City was ravaged for a week by a terrible fire (Sept. 465) which the Saint had foretold, although the Emperor and Court had ignore his prediction. A stream of folk was then to be seen, headed by the Emperor and Empress, coming to ask his forgiveness and to beg him to intercede for the distressed people of God.

Some time later, a violent storm arose and the pillar, which had not been well secured, rocked to and fro in the wind and driving rain. The disciples of the Elder trembled for his life but he uttered not a word and persevered in prayer. In the following year, his leathern tunic was torn off by the wind one winter's night, and the snow congealed over his body as a thick layer of ice. It was late next day before the wind abated and his disciples were able to set up the ladder and thaw him out with hot water. They were amazed to learn that, as he froze on the pillar, the Saint had been carried away in spirit to a place of refreshment where he conversed with Saint Symeon the Stylite. Following this incident, the pious Emperor insisted on a small shelter being put up above the pillar to protect Daniel from the worst of the weather. So greatly did the Emperor admire the holy Stylite's way of life that he had a palace built nearby at Anaplus, and brought all his royal guests and ambassadors out to visit the Saint. He came with Gubazius, King of the Lazi and, submitting their political differences to Daniel's mediation, they agreed on a treaty that satisfied them both. Gubazius corresponded with the Saint for the rest of his life, and whenever people from Lazica visited the City they always wanted to go out to see the holy Stylite. There were many other occasions on which the man of God put his prophetic spirit, his wisdom and the power of his prayer at the service of justice and righteousness.

The Emperor Zeno was driven from the throne in 475 by Basiliscus. The usurper took up the defense of the Monophysites, and made no secret of his hostility towards the decisions of the holy Council of Chalcedon and towards the pious Archbishop Acacius who, surrounded by the monks of the City, took refuge in the Church of Saint Sophia. Rejecting Basiliscus' attempts to win him to his side Saint Daniel, on the strength of a sign from Heaven, came down from his pillar, resolved, like Saint Anthony of old, to go into the City for the sake of the Church in distress. The vast crowd which had assembled in Saint Sophia's to hear Daniel proclaim the Orthodox faith, left the Great Church with him in their midst and made for the palace of the Hebdomon where the usurper had gone for refuge. It was a triumphal progress marked by the miraculous cleansing of a leper. When they reached the palace, Daniel shook off the dust from his leathern tunic as a sign of malediction (Matt. 10:13-14) and the whole crowd shook their garments as well, so that it made a thunderous noise. Frightened by this demonstration Basiliscus sent out his secretary to placate Daniel with smooth words, but he got a severe answer, and when he returned with it to the Emperor the palace tower collapsed. Next day, the Emperor returned to the City in great fear and prostrated himself at the feet of the Saint in the Great Church. He made a solemn profession of Orthodoxy and was reconciled with Acacius in the presence of all the people. Daniel wrought many miracles on the way back to his pillar where he predicted the approaching death of Basiliscus and the restoration of Zeno (786-91), who held the Saint in high regard, as did his successor Anastasios (491-518).

The Saint's pillar became one of the most venerated places of pilgrimage within reach of Constantinople, and people from all over the world made their way there. The Emperor prevailed with Daniel to allow a great hospice for the reception of these pilgrims to be built beside the church where rested the relics of Saint Symeon the Stylite that had been brought from Antioch. Like an earthly angel, with heart and eyes ever turned toward God, the holy man lived a stranger to vainglory and pride. His countless miracles were for him the opportunity of advancing in humility; for ever did he ascribe them to any virtue of his own, but he would send those who came to him to venerate the relics of Saint Symeon or to anoint themselves with the oil of the lamps which were burning near his tomb.

Daniel showed the same wonderful humility even in his death. He fell sick, and a sumptuous tomb was prepared for him by the Emperor Anastasios; but then Daniel recovered, and made the Emperor promise to bury his body deep in the earth, below the relics of Saints Ananias, Azarias and Misael (17 Dec.) – recently translated from Babylon to Constantinople – so that the answered prayers of anyone venerating his grave would be attributable to the holy Martyrs.

Several days before he died, he gathered together his many disciples to give them his last teaching and to ask the help of their prayers. Crowds of the faithful kept arriving from the City to be present at his last moments. In the middle of the night he fell into ecstasy and contemplated the assembly of all the Saints, who greeted him as one of their own and bade him celebrate the divine Liturgy with them. Having come to himself, he communicated in the holy Mysteries and fell asleep in peace the next day, delivering, at the very moment of expiring, a man possessed by an unclean spirit. With great difficulty his boy was taken down from the pillar on which he had remained crouched for thirty-three years. The plank on which his body had been secured to bring it down was placed upright and for many hours the people looked at him, as at a holy icon, and with cries and tears besought him to be an advocate with God on behalf of them all. Saint Daniel was buried in the presence of all the most eminent personages of the imperial City on December 11, 493, in his eighty-fourth year.

Daniel the Stylite, as depicted in the 11th century Menologion of Basil II